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ABSTRACT

This fact sheet addresses the mental health needs of children and adolescents. It emphasizes that children and adolescents can have mental health problems, that these mental health problems can be severe, and that these problems are common in young people. Some causes of mental health problems are identified, such as exposure to environmental toxins, violence, or chronic poverty. Warning signs of possible mental health problems are listed, such as feelings of sadness and hopelessness, anger, and fearfulness and big changes in behavior patterns. Mental health problems are seen as limiting young people and as leading to such problem behaviors as substance abuse or law breaking. A variety of mental health services are listed, although it is stressed that finding the right services requires an individualized approach. The fact sheet ends with a plea for more public awareness concerning the needs of an estimated two-thirds of young people with mental health problems who are not receiving any services. (DB)

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Children's and Adolescents' Mental Health

Center for Mental Health Services

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Mental Health Is Important

Mental health is how we think, feel, and act as we face life's situations. It is how we look at ourselves, our lives, and the people in our lives. It is how we evaluate options and make choices. Like our physical health, our mental health is important at every stage of life. Mental health includes how we handle stress, relate to others, and make decisions.

Mental health ranges from good to not so good and even to poor. A person's mental health may move through the range; sometimes that person is healthier than at other times. Sometimes he or she needs help handling problems. Many people experience mental health problems at some time during their lives.

Mental health can impact the daily life and the future of a young person. For example, schoolwork, relationships, and physical health can be affected by mental health. Caring for and protecting a child's mental health is a major part of helping that child grow to become the best he or she can be.

Children and Adolescents Can Have Mental Health Problems

Like adults, children and adolescents can have mental health problems that interfere with the way they think, feel, and act. These problems are real and painful. They can lead to school failure, family conflicts, drug abuse, violence, or suicide. Mental health problems often limit young people's current and future ability to be productive. In addition, these problems can be very costly to families, communities, and the health care system.

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Mental Health Problems Can Be Severe

Sometimes a young person has a mental health problem that severely disrupts his or her ability to function at home, in school, or in the community. This child or adolescent is said to have a "serious emotional disturbance." Usually the impaired emotional, behavioral, and mental functioning continues for a year or more. In some cases, the impairment lasts for a shorter period of time, but its severity is high or life-threatening.

These Problems Are Common in Young People

Many children and adolescents are affected by

In this fact sheet, "Mental Health Problems" for children and adolescents refers to the range of all diagnosable emotional, behavioral, and mental disorders. They include depression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and anxiety, conduct, and eating disorders. Mental health problems affect one in every five young people at any given time.

"Serious Emotional Disturbances" for children and adolescents refers to the above disorders when

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Many children and adolescents are affected by mental health problems. Studies show that, at any given time, at least one in five children and adolescents may have a mental health problem. At least 1 in 20--or as many as 3 million young people--may have a serious emotional disturbance. For information about the mental, emotional, and behavior disorders that can affect young people, call 1.800.789.2647.

disorders when they severely disrupt daily functioning in home, school, or community. Serious emotional disturbances affect 1 in every 20 young people at any given time.

The Causes Are Complicated

Mental health problems in children and adolescents can be caused by biology, environment, or a mix of both. Examples of biological causes are genetics, chemical imbalances in the body, and damage to the central nervous system, such as a head injury. There are many environmental factors that can put young people at risk of developing mental health problems. Examples of these factors include:

- exposure to environmental toxins, such as high levels of lead;
- exposure to violence, such as witnessing or being the victim of physical or sexual abuse, drive-by shootings, muggings, or other disasters;
- stress related to chronic poverty, discrimination, or other serious hardships; and
- loss of important people in the lives of young people through death, divorce, or broken relationships.

Families, schools, and communities are learning how to work together to provide healthy, safe, and supportive environments for children.

Some Warning Signs

A variety of signs may point to a possible mental health problem or serious emotional disturbance in a child or adolescent. Some of them are included in the list below. Pay attention if a child or adolescent you know:

Is troubled by feeling:

- really sad and hopeless without good reason and the feelings don't go away;
- very angry most of the time, cries a lot or overreacts to things;
- worthless or guilty a lot;
- anxious or worried a lot more than other young people;
- unable to get over a loss or death of someone important;
- extremely fearful--has unexplained fears or more fears than most kids;
- constantly concerned about physical problems or physical appearance;
- frightened that his or her mind is controlled or is out of control.

Experiences big changes, for example:

- does much worse in school;
- loses interest in things usually enjoyed;
- has unexplained changes in sleeping or eating;
- avoids friends or family and wants to be alone all the time;
- daydreams too much and can't get things done;
- feels life is too hard to handle or considers suicide;

- hears voices that cannot be explained.

Is limited by:

- poor concentration--can't think straight or make up his or her mind;
- inability to sit still or focus attention;
- worry about being harmed, hurting others, or about doing something "bad";
- need to wash, clean things, or perform certain routines hundreds of times a day in order to avoid danger;
- thoughts that race--almost too fast to follow;
- persistent nightmares.

Behaves in ways that cause problems, for example:

- uses alcohol or other drugs;
- eats large amounts of food and then makes self vomit, abuses laxatives, or takes enemas to avoid weight gain;
- continues to diet and/or exercise obsessively although bone-thin;
- constantly violates the rights of others or breaks the law without regard for other people;
- does things that can be life threatening.

If there is concern about a child's or adolescent's mental health, it is important to get help as soon as possible.

Services Can Help

Caring families and communities working together with service providers can help young people with mental health problems. These problems in children and adolescents can be recognized and treated. Depending on the problem a young person has, the range of services helping him or her may include:*

- case management (service coordination)
- community-based in-patient psychiatric care
- counseling (individual, group, and youth)
- crisis residential care
- crisis outreach teams
- day treatment
- education/special education services
- family support
- health services
- independent living supports
- intensive family-based counseling (in the home)
- legal services
- protection and advocacy
- psychiatric consultation
- recreation therapy
- residential treatment
- respite care
- self-help or support groups
- small therapeutic group care
- therapeutic foster care
- transportation
- tutoring
- vocational counseling.

**This list is not meant to be complete. Individualized services for children and their families implies flexibility, which creates a set of services uniquely suited for an individual child and family.*

The range of services that children and adolescents may need is coordinated in "systems of care," which exist in some communities. In systems of care, families and service providers work as partners to help young people with

mental health problems. The focus of this help is to find and build upon the strengths--not the difficulties--of each young person and family. The ethnic and cultural values of the people being served are understood and respected and used in the design of these systems. Mental health services and treatments for children and adolescents and their families are being improved through research. For more information on systems of care and cultural competence, call 1.800.789.2647.

Finding the Right Services

To find the right services for their children, families can:

- get accurate information from hotlines, libraries, or other sources;
- seek referrals from professionals;
- ask questions about treatments and services;
- talk to other families in their communities; and
- find family network organizations.

It is important for people who are not satisfied with the mental health care they are receiving to discuss their concerns with the provider, to ask for information, and/or to seek help from other sources.

Many Young People Still Need Help

An estimated two-thirds of all young people with mental health problems who need help are not getting it!

Most often, children's and adolescents' mental health problems are not recognized for what they are--and appropriate help is not sought.

The stigma about mental health problems keeps many people from asking for help. Stigma also causes isolation and discrimination for many young people and their families. Punishment is often incorrectly used to try to solve these problems within the home, at school, or in the juvenile justice system.

Good information about children's mental health problems is not available to many people who work with and care for children and adolescents. In addition, culturally competent and child-focused mental health services are not yet available in every community. Sometimes, there is not a good match between the family or problem and the provider or service that is offered.

When a serious emotional disturbance in a child or adolescent goes untreated, it can have grave personal, social, and economic impacts on the child and his or her family. The child may experience major problems interacting with others, fail in school, act out or show violent behavior, or have additional or more severe mental health problems as an adult. The family may incur high medical bills and the community also pays if the child becomes involved in the juvenile justice system. Most of all, the child pays if he or she doesn't get help.

Raising public awareness about children's mental health issues may lead to earlier recognition of possible mental health problems. Identifying these problems when they first appear may help to keep them from getting worse later.

Important Messages About Children's and Adolescents' Mental Health:

- Every child's mental health is important.
- Many children have mental health problems.
- These problems are real and painful and can be severe.
- Mental health problems can be recognized and treated.
- Caring families and communities working together can help.
- Information is available; call 1.800.789.2647.

Recommendations:

Promote the development of appropriate and accessible mental health services in your community.
Support research on children's and adolescents' mental health.

For free information about children's and adolescents' mental health--including publications, references, and referrals to local and national resources and organizations--call 1.800.789.2647; TTY 301.443.9006

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